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ABSTRACT

In many instances, the promotion of educational assessments has been viewed as a threat to some groups. Carefully conceived operational and analysis plans for state assessment may have little impact unless the purposes of assessment are clear and diffusion and utilization of information are well planned. Equally important is the provision of technical assistance in interpreting the implications of the assessment and providing administrators with adequate lead-in time. This paper addresses the pre- and post-assessment field work which was provided for local school administrators, teacher groups, supervisors, and state agency personnel. It also outlines the most effective means for reporting information to educators, lay public, and the legislature. The need for effective utilization of the results is discussed. (Author/RS)

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# THE PROMOTION, DISSEMINATION, AND UTILIZATION PLAN FOR THE NORTH CAROLINA STATEWIDE ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

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## Introductory Remarks

I am pleased to have the opportunity to describe some of our experiences in promoting a state assessment and in disseminating and utilizing its results. I am sure that many of you have conducted such a project or are anticipating that you will have this responsibility in the near future. Let me hasten to say that my experiences last year at AERA contributed significantly to the success of our assessment. In fact, many of the features of the North Carolina State Assessment were adaptations of the methods used by the National Assessment of Educational Progress and by the state assessments of other states which are represented here today. Perhaps our experiences with assessment will be able to help others as much as the early state assessments helped us.

The momentum for thorough state assessments of educational progress is rising. Many states now have legislative mandates for assessments. Many other states avoided the legislative mandate because they already had assessments or were in the planning phases for an assessment. National interest is focusing upon accountability and assessment through specially funded projects such as the Cooperative Accountability Project (CAP) headquartered in Denver, Colorado, and the State Educational Accountability Repository, (SEAR) which is based in Madison, Wisconsin. These and other national efforts as well as state projects indicate that assessments will be <u>one</u> of the components of a total accountability system. We must, however, take care to insure that the momentum which we all need to secure the personnel and the resources that we need does not suddenly become a critical mass which blows the whole concept to smithereens. It is to this point that my

paper will be directed. That is, how to manage the promotion of state assessments; how to interpret and disseminate its findings to various audiences; and how to utilize the information to its utmost.

In many instances, the promotion of educational assessments has been viewed with extreme suspicion and in some cases with open hostility. Administrators were concerned that the results would cause problems either within the system or with the lay public. Teachers were concerned that someone was checking up on them. Psychometricians were concerned with test bias or with the possibility of misinterpretation of results. Yet, these same groups have been advocates of student testing for years. Perhaps, the major concern arose when the results were linked with the concept of accountability. In past years, the test information was used primarily for diagnosis of student needs if it was used at all. Thus, assessments must be undertaken with an awareness that they will be considered as threats to some groups.

Other concerns arise over the interpretation and dissemination of the results. Past experiences in many states and local educational agencies indicate that dissemination may well be as large a problem as most people imagine. With careful forethought and planning, however, most of the rough spots in dissemination can be avoided. The major problems appear in inappropriately comprehending the meaning of the data - that is, what do grade equivalents mean, how can percentile distributions be compared, or how can percentages of students at various intervals of achievement be interpreted. Misinterpreting a status variable for a cause and effect variable often leads people to inappropriate conclusions. A carefully prepared answer to the problems which can be anticipated, however, is more appropriate than avoiding the issue by not reporting selected data.

The failure to plan for different dissemination approaches to tell the assessment story also is a major mistake which should be avoided. The technical presentation of the findings will not be useful in working with boards of education, key administrators, lay persons, the mass media, and most educators. Instead, use a presentation which is a highlighted, multi-media presentation that presents some data but mostly presents interpretations of the data. It should be relatively short. The message should be comprehensive. And, supporting data should be available in printed form. The old adage of "tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you have told them" can be applicable if a tasteful presentation is prepared which avoids any sense of "talking down" to the audience.

Finally, the utilization of the data will be the phase which is most difficult to handle properly. May people have to become involved in using a data set which may seem foreign to them and perhaps somewhat frightening in terms of its massiveness.

Care must be taken in communicating with curriculum specialists about the possible uses of assessment information. This is the stage where researchers must shift from a major role as conductors of the study to a role which supports the programming specialists. The various program specialists should be encouraged to assume a high degree of visibility, a high degree of attention, and a high degree of responsibility. Unless the supporting role is carefully played by the researchers, the opportunities which exist for program improvement may not be realized.

Now, my comments will specifically describe how the State Assessment in North Carolina was promoted, disseminated, and utilized.

## Promotion of State Assessment

The promotion of state assessment began with the key decision maker in our State agency - that is our chief state school officer. In seeking to improve our schools through more effective planning, it became apparent to him that there was no reliable, benchmark data upon which to assess the needs of the State or to set goals and objectives.

During his first term of office, our Superintendent requested a study which utilized any information available to the agency. To improve on the quality and objectivity of this information base, he requested that we explore several alternatives for state assessment. The approaches to the problem and the task of securing resources were primarily the responsibility of the Assistant Superintendent for Research and Development. The first promotion then was one of financing a planning grant and in promoting the assessment plan to its potential supporters - including both financial and program supporters.

To make a long story a bit shorter, we capitalized upon the intent and the legislative mandate which were part of the ESEA Title III and Title I State Plans. To round out the financial support, some funds were diverted from State resources Considerable in-kind support in personnel was anticipated from the State agency and from the local educational agencies.

The State agency support was secured more or less by a directive but the support from the local educational agencies was strictly voluntary. Several briefings were held for local superintendents with representatives from mass media invited. The tie between the need for more effective planning and its dependency upon a sound data base was the primary point of

the briefings. The specifics of the assessment plan were discussed at each briefing. Consideration was given to minor modifications but not to wholesale changes. Little objection was evidenced by the local superintendents and considerable support was apparent. The media treated the assessment plans in a factual manner but with little fanfare or emotionalism.

Nearly six months elapsed between the time the superintendents became aware of state assessment and the start-up date for the project. Local superintendents were briefed on their responsibilities in the assessment about four months prior to the time when students were to be involved.

If there is a key to promotion of state assessments, I feel that it is in providing a detailed plan with adequate lead time to all those involved in the assessment. Another important consideration may be the attempt by us to keep testing time for each student to within one day and to minimize the disruption within the school by testing a sample of students and not requiring the services of any teachers to administer the tests.

## Dissemination of Results

After the data has been collected and analyzed in a state assessment, alternative must be considered on how to effectively disseminate the results. There obviously are various clientels for the information - other researchers, educational decision makers, educational programmers, the mass media, the Legislature, and a concerned public. In our assessment, we anticipated the needs, concerns, interests, and level of expertise which was characteristic of each client group. Our first decision was to convert the technical report

into a document and media presentation which was designed for developing awareness among the general public. The media package was to be the main medium of communication but was to be buttressed by a publication which contained similar material but in more detail. The media package was to stimulate some first impressions which could be followed up by a detailed study of the whole report. One of our constraints was time. The media presentation had to be approximately 30 minutes long, it had to move fast, and it had to have a professional quality to the slides and narrative.

We expended approximately eight man months in the transition from a technical report to the media presentation. In planning for our future assessments, we will insure that more adequate staff time and resources are allocated for this phase of the project.

In releasing the report, the CSSO made the decisions about who would receive the report and how it would be released. The decision was reached to release the state assessment information at a public meeting which included each of the local school superintendents, the members of the State Board of Education, and representatives from the press and television. In order to prevent the newsmen from misinterpreting the results of the assessment in a rush to make their paper's daily deadline, we held briefings several days ahead of the formal presentation. Each member of the press which accepted the invitation to the special briefing agreed to hold the story until after the formal release. To their credit, they did not release the information ahead of time. Part of the briefings included news releases which our Public Information Office had written as well as answers to a series of questions which they anticipated that lay persons might ask. This cooperative effort with our Public Information Office proved to be an essential part of our dissemination effort.

The release of the information on state assessment occurred in a flury of activity and a sense of anticipation. There were no repercussions from the results, which by in large were considered as negative. The press and television appeared to go the "extra mile" in reporting the results fairly and accurately. Thus, the dissemination for initial awareness went very smoothly.

The second stage of awareness came through the efforts of the local superintendents as they worked with their boards of education and the local press. The specially prepared news releases the questions and answers, which were supplied to each superintendent at the briefing, were used with newsmen in his area. Although our assessment indicated that were were behind the national average, the reaction to date has been: Well, now that we know that this is the situation, what can we do about it? One editorial in a daily newspaper which has been highly critical of many educational decisions lately had the following statement: "State Superintendent Craig Phillips has done a courageous thing in undertaking this first assessment." We feel that our efforts at general awareness have been successful to date in getting the total picture across to the people of North Carolina.

We are currently in the next stage of our dissemination process - that of carefully evaluating the results and their implications. During this stage, we intend to work with groups of educators, parents, and legislators. The basic media package will be shown, but it will be followed up by detailed discussions of the information. In many instances, we will begin discussing implications for utilizing the data at the local levels.

A key to our success in dissemination to date can be attributed to three factors - credibility, anticipation, and simplicity. The assessment was carefully planned and implemented in a manner which gave it credibility

with school officials. We were able to anticipate what various client groups would want from the assessment and how they would react to the findings. We attempted to avoid fumbling for answers and to avoid making inferences from the status study which might reflect cause and effect. More importantly, we guarded against others making these interpretations. We also kept the media presentation relatively simple. That is, if interpretations were called for, we made them rather than expecting each reader to sift through the technical report and to use correct professional judgments in deciding what the data meant.

## Utilization of Findings

The assessment project is just beginning to enter the utilization of findings phase. We currently are working with the program areas which were assessed, such as math, language arts, and career awareness. Our intent is to continue with the analysis of this year's data in a manner which may allow for curricula judgments to be made. We can look at the subscales in the reading, language arts, mathematics, and career awareness tests. If needed, we can analyze the tests by items and relate these items to specific objectives. It may become possible for our curricula specialists to begin interrelating the objectives that were assessed with their efforts in curriculum development and with staff development programs.

Perhaps the results of identifiable groups in the State assessment which did poorly on the tests can be re-analyzed to determine what were the major difficulties. These areas of difficulty could be diagnosed in more depth with criterion referenced instruments and prescriptive learning activities planned.

In any event, one of the major uses of the assessment data will be to aid in program development at the State and local level. This use can only

be realized with the assistance of curriculum specialists. Therefore, this is a significant opportunity for them which carries with it a major responsibility for leadership.

The norm tables developed for the State, the regions, and the type of communities are another major use of the findings. Each local school has a testing program which is coordinated through their central office. In some cases, the schools are using the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Lorge-Thorndike Intelligence Test. Where the tests are being used and where, the testing time, and the grade level are the same as in the State Assessment, comparisons can be made to student norms which are more typical of their students than the national norms which have been used in the past. Thus, it gives a local school an opportunity to have an additional comparison which may be judged to have more meaning for teachers, counselors, and parents than national norms. School systems with different tests have the opportunity to gradually switch their testing programs to become compatible with the State Assessment. Another option for an LEA would be to test a representative sample of students with the ITBS and use these results for comparative purposes.

Uses at the State level are obvious. The information can become a benchmark for future comparisons. Even now, the assessment can be a first step in becoming accountable for educational attainment in the State. In the future, relationships between inputs and achievement can be studied and used in making the most effective use of current resources and in requesting additional resources. The most important benefit is perhaps, the gesture to the public that leaders in education are willing to measure and report on the output of their system. Continuing to do so with other assessments and with improved and more comprehensive assessments should serve to reinforce the public's faith in education. If this becomes a reality, the birth pains of initial assessments will have been worthwhile.